**HJR 18 Starts Process of Extending Foster Care to Age 21**

By: Julie P. Miller, Esq., Delaware Youth Opportunities Initiative Coordinator

Young people who age out of foster care face significant challenges as they attempt to make the transition to adulthood on their own. Over the past decade, knowledge about adolescent brain development has increased our understanding of “emerging adulthood.” Emerging adulthood is a period that spans early adulthood through age 25, during which time young people are developing the knowledge and skills that will serve them throughout their adult life. With this new information, states across the country are looking at ways to redefine adolescent foster care, and Delaware is at the forefront of these efforts.

The Policy Working Group of the Delaware Youth Opportunities Initiative (DYOI) has made major strides in helping youth aging out of foster care, using research-based tactics. Over the past few months, this working group drafted a resolution to begin the process of extending foster care in Delaware from age 18 to age 21. Much of the resolution was written with the help of current and former foster youth and with support from Lt. Governor Matt Denn, Cabinet Secretary Vivian Rapposelli, and the Department of Services for Children, Youth and their Families. Through their hard work and support, HB 18 was passed unanimously by both the House and Senate during the last week of the legislative session and signed by Governor Markell.

A report is being drafted to assess the fiscal impact of the proposed policy change and to describe all proposed programmatic elements. The report, which will be sent to the General Assembly and to the Governor in September, includes DYOI and its Policy Working Group as part of a committee tasked with framing extended care in Delaware. Once the General Assembly views this report, a bill will be submitted in January to formally extend care to 21 in a developmentally appropriate way, with full implementation expected by 2014, if the bill passes. In extending care, DYOI and the new Policy Working Group will be listening to those who experienced foster care in order to build the best system possible in Delaware. In addition, Delaware will act as a model for a national campaign by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Beyond 18. Doing it Right, to extend care in a developmentally appropriate way in every state.

**Equal Rights for All: Expanding Voting Rights for People With Criminal Histories**

By: Joanna Champney, Associate Executive Director

In Delaware, 3.7% of the voting age population is disenfranchised (unable to vote) due to a felony conviction. Delaware is one of a small number of states that has imposed a “waiting period” for reinstating voting rights after individuals have been discharged from prison & probation and have paid all fines & restitution owed.

House Bill 9 is the first leg of a constitutional amendment that would remove the current 5-year voting rights waiting period for felons who have served their prison time, have been discharged from probation, and have paid all fines & restitution owed. Under the new law, individuals who are discharged from probation and who have paid all fines & restitution can immediately register to vote. The first leg of HB 9 passed in the General Assembly in June and was signed by the Governor on June 28. Because an amendment to the state’s constitution is required for this change, the bill must successfully pass through the General Assembly again during the next legislative session in order for the revision to be adopted.

The number of people nationally who are barred from voting due to a felony conviction has risen dramatically in recent decades, according to the national criminal justice sentencing reform group The Sentencing Project, based in Washington, D.C. Of the 5.85 million Americans who were disenfranchised in 2010, only about one quarter of these were actually incarcerated at that time. The remaining three quarters of the group on college and on my new career path. At 20 years old, I was being seen as an important and valued employee. I had my own office, business cards, I could inspire others with my story, I was meeting some of Delaware’s great leaders (including the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, various legislators, and top administrators in various state agencies) in the child welfare system, and I was being heard as a voice for youth who have aged out of foster care.

If someone had told me in 2007 that in the future, I would have a job relevant to my degree before graduating, be able to leave my restaurant job, graduate college on time, and then receive a request directly after graduation to be the full-time Assistant to Delaware’s Lt. Governor, I would have told that person that they may want to seek professional help for their insanity. Now, looking back across the last 6 years, I realize that one of the most developmentally beneficial, and skill sharpening experiences I have had was with the Delaware Center for Justice and the wonderful passionate people who work hard for what they believe.